

## Play-Based Learning: Playing the Way to Rich Learning

Jamie Blyth

### **Abstract**

*Play-based learning is a combination of rich play and curricular outcomes. When implemented in a classroom, play-based learning has a multitude of positive effects on the students, both academically and social-emotionally. As leaders of a play-based learning classroom, educators must understand the different types of play, how to create an inclusive environment, and how to use their expertise to enhance the play and learning of their students. When used effectively, play-based learning can enrich and extend the learning of all students.*

Children spend the first five years of their lives soaking in the world around them, and then they enter the formal academic world of kindergarten. To go from a world of play, where the children are in control, to a teacher-directed classroom can be quite the shock for some children (Lewis, 2016), especially as kindergarten has become more rigorous, with higher academic expectations, in recent years (Danniels & Pyle, 2016). As a result, teachers feel pressured to meet the curriculum standards, and are more likely to focus on direct instruction techniques, instead of letting the children guide the learning through their interests and passions (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). This brings up the question of whether it is developmentally appropriate for children to learn in only a direct instruction context, instead of the play-based environment they are used to.

Play is essential for children's learning and development. It is through play that children make sense of the world around them and build on their previous learning (O'Leary, 2021). Play is "freely chosen, actively engaging, opportunistic, pleasurable, creative, and concerned more with means than ends" (Danniels & Pyle, 2016, p. 275). Play-based learning is the perfect strategy to unify the need for learning and the need for play. The purpose of play-based learning is as it sounds: "to learn while at play" (Danniels & Pyle, 2016, p. 285). To elaborate, play-based learning brings together the child-centered act of play and educational curriculum driven by teachers (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Play-based learning focuses on expanding on children's interests and abilities, through a variety of play scenarios and structured learning opportunities and has been found to provide a deeper learning experience than direct instruction or free play alone (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). To fully understand how play-based learning can be effective in classrooms, educators must comprehend the benefits of play-based learning, how play-based learning is a tool for inclusion, the types of play used, and the role of the educator in a play-based learning classroom.

### **The Benefits of Play-Based Learning**

Empathy, curiosity, innovation, creativity, leadership. All of these are skills that can be learned through play-based learning (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2015). Play-based learning has an abundance of benefits for children, many of which fall under the category of social-emotional learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). One such benefit is the development of self-regulation skills, whereby children learn to manage their emotions and behaviors during play with classmates (Danniels & Pyle, 2016). Through play, children are given the opportunity to collaborate and develop problem solving skills (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). When children learn conflict resolution skills, it also helps them to build confidence in themselves and their regulation abilities. With practice, these skills will translate to situations outside of play, therefore increasing the benefit to

the children. During play-based learning, children also learn social norms such as turn taking, sharing, responsibility, cleaning up after oneself, and transitions (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Play-based learning has also been shown to improve children's communication skills. Play gives children the chance to practice their communication skills with peers, such as sharing thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Through pretend play scenarios, where children take on roles and navigate the direction of play, children learn routines of conversations and advanced language skills. Children involved in play-based learning have better verbalization, improved language comprehension, and an overall more advanced language level (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015). In addition to improving communication and language skills, play-based learning can also improve children's literacy scores (Danniels & Pyle, 2016). Research has found that when literacy is embedded in play scenarios it improves literacy scores and communication skills at the same time. Play-based learning can also increase children's math scores (Danniels & Pyle, 2016), which is important because high achievement in kindergarten math is one of the biggest indicators of success in later academic years (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Many of the kindergarten math outcomes can be achieved using hands-on learning, such as comparing quantities and demonstrating an understanding of patterns (Manitoba Education, 2013). Therefore, it is a natural progression that these outcomes be learned with play-based learning. Executive functioning is also increased during play, as children expand their ability to retain information, especially during games with rules (O'Leary, 2021). Any game that involves strategy gives children the chance to make plans and change them based on the flow of the game. This expands working memory, which is an essential skill for academic learning.

As shown, many benefits of play-based learning fall within the realm of social-emotional and academic learning; however, play-based learning also has benefits for children's physical health (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015). Play-based learning can benefit both gross motor skills such as running, jumping, skipping, or catching a ball, and fine motor skills such as scissor skills, zippers, using writing utensils, or doing puzzles. In addition to physical health, there are also benefits to children's mental health, such that when children play it increases overall feelings of well-being (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015).

While it has clearly been shown that the benefits of play-based learning are vast during childhood, research has also found that when children have a positive early childhood experience, which involves play, it leads to improved overall health, better stress management, and a longer life expectancy during adulthood (O'Leary, 2021). This is all the more reason to implement play-based learning in classrooms. Educators using play-based learning are helping to create not only well-rounded children, but well-rounded adults.

### **Play-Based Learning as a Tool for Inclusion**

Play-based learning is a tool for inclusion. Students with developmental delays can benefit greatly from play-based learning. When discussing the inclusion of students with developmental delays in play-based learning classrooms, it is important to note the difference between academic inclusion and community inclusion (Danniels & Pyle, 2021). Academic inclusion refers to integrating the students into the classroom and making sure that there is an access point for them in the academic tasks being complete. Community inclusion refers to making sure that all students feel as though they are valued and respected members of the classroom, and this is where the concept of play comes in. Typically, students with developmental delays participate in more solitary play and less collaborative play with classmates (Danniels & Pyle, 2021). They are also often excluded from the play of other children. In a classroom that supports play-based learning, students with developmental delays can receive the same benefits as typically developed students if the teacher is an active participant in the play (Danniels & Pyle, 2021). The teacher must be there to support and extend play if needed. When the teacher becomes an active participant, students with developmental delays show growth in areas such as

communication and social-emotional learning. Including students with developmental delays in play-based learning will benefit all members of the classroom by creating a community of inclusion, and therefore a community of empathetic learners.

### **Types of Play**

When exploring types of play, there are two different conceptualizations to delve into. The first is from the Manitoba context. As more research has been done, many of the Canadian provinces have implemented play-based learning curriculums (Danniels & Pyle, 2016), especially following the Canadian Ministers of Education Canada statement endorsing play-based learning (CMEC, 2012). The Manitoba government has outlined five types of play that children learn and grow from (Manitoba Learning and Advanced Training, 2015). The first is exploratory play, which is when children experiment and play with new ideas or materials. This can be achieved through sensory play or the use of loose parts. Exploratory play is often linked to math and problem solving. A second type of play is constructive play, which is described as goal-oriented play, using open-ended materials. This can be seen through creative outlets, such as making art or the building of structures. Children may look for patterns or similar characteristics within a collection of items. Teachers can support students in their constructive learning by posing questions as the children play. Symbolic learning is the type of play where children make one item, or person, represent another. This shows the emerging ability to be a representative thinker. Excelling at symbolic play has been shown to be a precursor to early literacy skills. Socio-dramatic play is seen when children act out stories or scenarios, such as doctor's office or bakery. This type of play gives children an insight into how the world around them works. It also allows them to connect to how others think and feel, promoting empathy. Finally, games with rules are where children can learn to follow directions, take turns, and work on impulse control. Board games, card games, and group games are all opportunities for learning. Manitoba teachers are encouraged to incorporate all of these types of play into their early years classrooms.

The second conceptualization of types of play comes from Danniels and Pyle (2016). While the Manitoba document focuses more on specific activities, Danniels and Pyle focused on types of play being on a continuum from child directed to teacher directed. The first type of play on the continuum is free play. During this type of play there is no guidance or interference from the teacher, and the play is mostly imaginative and pretend. When children choose materials during free play it is often building blocks, sensory tables, or playing with toys, such as cars or dinosaurs. While there is a place for free play within the classroom, too much free play leads to teachers not taking initiative for the children's growth. Next on the continuum is inquiry play, which is still child led, but the teacher becomes involved to enhance the learning experience based on the children's interests. This type of play often includes spontaneous, in-the-moment teaching. In the middle of the continuum is collaborative play, which is shared control between the teacher and students. These play scenarios are set up in advance by the teacher, based on the interests of the students. The teacher has specific learning goals in mind; however, the students still have control within the scenario. As teacher control increases, the next type of play is playful learning, where teachers create scenarios with specific outcomes and the children play within the scenario. This play scenario is not based on the students' interests, but can still be enjoyable for the students as they play. The final and most teacher-directed type of play is learning through games. The teacher intentionally teaches skills, such as math or literacy, through a variety of games. Research has shown that the most effective learning happens in the middle of the continuum, where students and teachers share control (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

When comparing the two of types of play conceptualizations, it is easy to see how they can fit together. The activities described in Manitoba Learning and Advanced Training's (2015) document have a place within Danniels and Pyle's continuum. It is important for educators to

understand the wide variety of types of play so that they can incorporate them within the classroom, in order to enhance the learning of students.

### **The Role of the Educator**

The teacher is a key contributor in play-based learning, but their exact role has been debated (Danniels & Pyle, 2016). Some believe that the role of the teacher is merely to provide the materials and then to let the play happen, making sure not to disturb the children. However, most research concludes that teachers must be involved in play to increase the engagement and learning of the children. It is important for teachers to understand what their role in a play-based classroom is, what educator skills are important for the play-based classroom, and how to find effective professional development in the area.

The role of the educator in play-based learning is “to be actively observing, assessing, and acting on opportunities to extend students’ learning” (Taylor & Boyer, 2020, p. 131). The teachers are the leaders of the classroom, and while they share control of many play-based scenarios with their students, it is up to the teachers to ensure that rich learning is happening (O’Leary, 2020). When teachers join in, it has been found to increase the duration and complexity of play (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Teachers must remain cautious that they do not take over the play, because children interpret a situation as play only if they feel that have control over it.

To be effective during play-based learning, the teacher must have a strong understanding of curriculum in order to see connections during play. If the teacher can spontaneously recognize learning opportunities, it enhances the experience of the whole classroom (Hunter, 2020). Teachers must take an active interest in their students in order to learn about their passions and the prior knowledge of the classroom. This will help to guide the learning and enable teachers to create rich play scenarios. Additionally, teachers must know how to interact with their students in a way that supports the social-emotional growth that happens during play (Hunter, 2020). Students must be given control of their learning; however, having teachers model appropriate peer interactions and problem-solving skills has been shown to help students grow.

Knowing how to become involved in play-based learning is not instinctual for all teachers; therefore, it is imperative that teachers receive the right kind of professional development (Hunter, 2019). Having a colleague model how a teacher effectively interacts in, and leads, a play-based learning classroom has been proven more effective than simply sending teachers to a conference style in-service. In addition to modelling, using constructive feedback and professional conversation have also been proven to be effective at enhancing teacher practice. This shows the importance of creating a network for teachers who use play-based learning within a school or a division.

### **Play-Based Learning for All**

A play-based learning classroom can provide rich learning experiences for all students. It has numerous benefits for children, from social-emotional learning to physical development. It provides opportunities for inclusion, so that students of all abilities can engage with their peers and experience the joy of playing. In addition to understanding the benefits of play-based learning and the opportunity for inclusion, educators must also understand the types of play that should be included in a play-based learning classroom, and the role of the teacher within the play-based classroom. Children are born to play, and by tapping into that innate instinct educators can help students learn in the rich environment of a play-based learning classroom.

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### About the Author

*Jamie Blyth is an M.Ed. student in the educational administration stream at Brandon University. She is a resource teacher in a K-4 school. Jamie lives in rural Manitoba with her husband and two children. She enjoys camping, a good book, and spending time with her family.*